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CASABELLA

DAL 1928

ITALIAN+ENGLISH EDITION
ANNO LXXXII N.02 – 8 FEB 2018
ITALIA €12,00
AUT €22,50. BEL €21,70. CAN $37,00.
CHE IT CHF27,00. CHE DE CHF27,50.
DEU €28,00. ESP €21,40. FIN €22,00.
FRA €20,00. GBR £22,00.
PRT CONT €20,10. USA $31,50.

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GRUPPO MONDADORI

"The Bijlmer offers boredom on a heroic scale"

— Rem Koolhaas, 1976

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SOMMARIO

882 — FEBBRAIO 2018

1996–2017 INDICI NUOVA EDIZIONE
INDICES 632–881 NEW EDITION

IN CONSULTAZIONE ESCLUSIVA SU:
AVAILABLE FOR REFERENCE ONLY AT:
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NL Architects e XVW architectuur. Ristrutturazione dell'edificio di Kleiburg nel quartiere Bijlmermeer, Amsterdam

STIJN BRAKKE

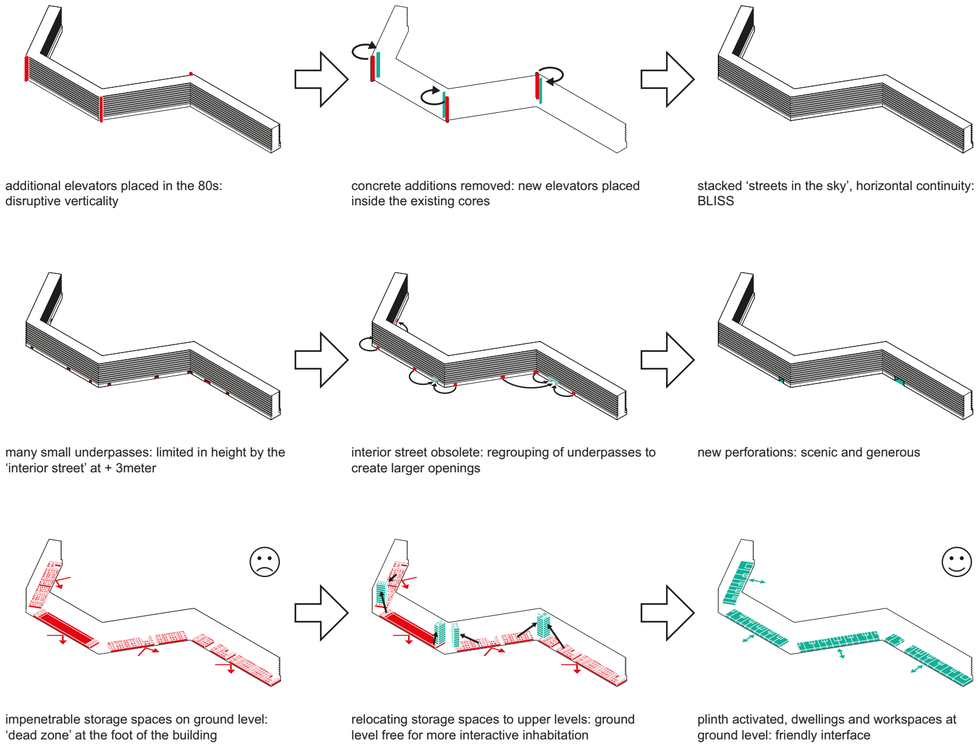
1
—particolare d'angolo con il passaggio a doppia altezza e gli accessi alla distribuzione verticale
—corner detail with the two-story passage and the accesses to the vertical circulation

1 euro per Kleiburg

Camillo Magni

A volte capita che un edificio possa diventare il simbolo di una storia, di un momento o di una nazione. Il valore travalica la specificità del manufatto edilizio e abbraccia una dimensione più ampia. Bijlmermeer per gli olandesi è sicuramente uno tra questi. Realizzato negli anni Sessanta, è l'immagine più aulica di un impulso positivista finalizzato a risolvere il cronico deficit abitativo che affliggeva le grandi città europee. Straordinario tentativo dell'azione pubblica, Bijlmermeer è stato il simbolo di un nuovo modo di pensare la città, di declinare i dettami del movimento moderno e di trasformarli in un quartiere capace di ospitare circa 100.000 abitanti, per estensione più grande del centro storico di Amsterdam. Il passare degli anni ha restituito, tuttavia, una storia più controversa e complessa (vedi box) fatta di luci e ombre di cui il progetto presentato in queste pagine rappresenta l'ultimo glorioso episodio: il rilancio e la ristrutturazione dell'edificio di Kleiburg, uno dei cinquanta corpi edilizi che costituiva il quartiere Bijlmermeer.
A seguito della progressiva decadenza fisica e del conseguente abbandono sociale, a partire dalla metà degli anni Novanta, la Municipalità ha avviato un vigoroso programma di riqualificazione. Gran parte degli edifici di Bijlmermeer sono stati demoliti (circa trenta) e sostituiti da nuove costruzioni basse e a corte. Al modello della città giardino si è preferito quello della città storica, senza replicarne, tuttavia, complessità e densità. In questo processo è esplicita la critica ai modelli modernisti utilizzati negli anni Sessanta a favore delle più diffuse istanze orientate ai valori della suburbanità. La rigida divisione tra i percorsi veicolari e pedonali è stata ribaltata, destinando il viadotto esistente a una nuova linea di trasporto pubblico su rotaia e spostando il traffico veicolare al piano terra. L'originaria struttura urbana a "nido d'ape" dispersa nel verde si è stemperata poco alla volta, assorbita da una nuova città ove il rapporto tra strada, edificio e cortina edilizia è ricomparso come matrice costitutiva del quartiere. In questo ampio processo la Municipalità ha deciso di preservare un tassello originale di Bijlmermeer quale testimonianza della storia della città. Kleiburg è uno dei sei edifici che compone questo residuo e l'ultimo a essere stato ristrutturato, diventando un esempio virtuoso nel recupero dei grandi manufatti edilizi del moderno. Nel 2009 la società Housing Corporation Rochdale, stimando in 70 milioni di euro il costo di ristrutturazione e subendo pressioni da parte degli abitanti e dell'Amministrazione Pubblica, abbandona i programmi di demolizione e avvia una consultazione per scegliere un operatore in grado di sviluppare l'operazione immobiliare. Il consorzio De FLAT (composto da Kondor Wessels Vastgoed, Hendriks CPO, Vireo Vastgoed e Hollands Licht) si aggiudica la gara diventando il nuovo proprietario per il simbolico costo di un euro. L'idea proposta è radicale e sperimentale: ristrutturare gli esterni, gli impianti, i ballatoi e le parti comuni, lasciando incompiuti gli alloggi al fine di minimizzare l'investimento iniziale e consentire ai futuri proprietari di scegliere specifiche soluzioni, ipotizzando anche processi di autocostruzione ("Klussen - to do it yourself"). Ciò ha consentito di destinare al mercato alloggi estremamente economici, sperimentando un nuovo modello finanziario e attuativo nei processi residenziali olandesi. Il progetto di NL Architects e XVW architectuur si inserisce in questo percorso e si distingue per la pragmatica precisione con cui vengono messe in campo le azioni progettuali. L'obiettivo degli autori si è indirizzato su due aspetti: da una parte hanno restituito la monumentale bellezza dell'originale edificio di Fop Ottenhof (1906–68) e dall'altra hanno introdotto una serie di modifiche strumentali ai nuovi usi. In una stagione connotata dalla retorica sulla variazione, sorprende notare la schietta fermezza con cui sono stati trattati gli aspetti dimensionali: l'edificio terminato nel 1971 ha uno sviluppo lineare di oltre 450 metri per dieci piani di altezza, con una distribuzione a ballatoio uniforme, capace di ospitare 500 alloggi, un'autorimessa, una strada pubblica e dei depositi al piano terra. I prospetti non presentano variazioni e la monotona ripetizione di finestre e parapetti connota l'immagine complessiva. La prima azione proposta ha riguardato la rimozione degli ascensori realizzati negli anni Ottanta in facciata, al fine di restituire l'uniformità orizzontale dei prospetti ripuliti da tutte le superfetazioni stratificate nel tempo. Non c'è timore in questa scelta, che alla fine si è dimostrata vincente, e la dimensione dell'edificio si mostra in tutta la sua straordinarietà. I serramenti esterni sono stati sostituiti da nuove vetrate, prevedendo il cambio delle parti opache con nuovi vetri per migliorare l'illuminazione naturale degli alloggi. I progettisti hanno predisposto un ampio abaco di soluzioni di finestre, demandando agli abitanti la scelta più congeniale alle singole esigenze. Il risultato è stato una serie di leggere variazioni, quasi invisibili a uno sguardo affrettato, che instaurano un interessante dialogo con la spietata uniformità del volume.
Una seconda azione ha coinvolto il piano terra, all'interno del quale, originariamente, vi erano magazzini e depositi; al fine di rivitalizzare il contatto con lo spazio, i magazzini sono stati spostati ai piani superiori, nei pressi della distribuzione verticale, e sostituiti da appartamenti, spazi di lavoro, spazi comuni e un asilo nido. Oltre a ciò, gli undici angusti passaggi che attraversavano il corpo di fabbrica al piano terra sono stai accorpati in tre grandi gallerie a doppia altezza (sei metri). Inoltre, la dismissione della strada al primo piano ha consentito la realizzazione di spazi connessi in duplex al piano terra. Queste azioni hanno avuto il medesimo obiettivo: trasformare l'identità del piede dell'edificio costruendo relazioni di continuità con lo spazio circostante e intercettando i percorsi orizzontali pubblici con quelli verticali privati. Nei piani superiori dedicati agli alloggi, i progettisti hanno sperimentato nuove forme aggregative. A partire dall'originale griglia, hanno modificato i setti di separazione e disegnato soluzioni basiche che potessero essere realizzate in fasi successive dagli inquilini. L'incrocio tra le connessioni verticali degli ascensori e quelle orizzontali dei ballatoi è stato ridefinito attraverso piccole variazioni finalizzate a cambiare la gerarchia dei percorsi domestici e la connessione tra depositi e alloggi.
La qualità del progetto va ricercata nella precisione con cui gli autori hanno operato attraverso piccoli ma significativi accorgimenti che stravolgono l'edificio senza snaturarlo. Non esiste ideologia, ma semplice pragmatismo in cui l'approccio fortemente gestuale che ha caratterizzato i progetti di recupero del passato (da OMA alla diffusione della demolizione) si stempera in un più delicato modo di interpretare l'architettura. L'opera è stata insignita con il Mies van der Rohe Award 2017: per la prima volta l'istituzione premia un edificio residenziale. Per questa ragione, per la qualità del progetto e per i modi con cui si è sviluppato Kleiburg - Bijlmermeer torna oggi a essere, come in passato, un simbolo dell'architettura contemporanea.

2



2
—schemi assonometrici di progetto. A: gli ascensori aggiunti negli anni Ottanta vengono rimossi per restituire l’unitarietà e l’andamento orizzontale dell’edificio; B: gli undici passaggi al piano terra vengono aggregati in tre grandi portici a doppia altezza connessi ai percorsi pedonali urbani; C: i magazzini al piano terra che rendevano impermeabile il rapporto tra edificio e suolo vengono spostati ai piani superiori e sostituiti da nuove funzioni residenziali e collettive
—axonometric schemes of the project. A: the elevators added in the 1980s have been removed to restore the uniform horizontal form of the building; B: the eleven ground floor passages are grouped in three large two-story porticos connected to the urban pedestrian routes; C: the ground floor warehouses that made the relationship between the building and the ground impermeable have been shifted to the upper levels and replaced by new residential and community functions

3 4
—viste d’insieme dell’intervento. L’andamento orizzontale dell’edificio evidenzia gli aspetti dimensionali: 450 metri lineari per dieci piani di altezza
—overall view of the project. The horizontal arrangement of the building brings out its proportional aspects: 450 linear meters by ten stories of height

3


STIJN POELSTRA


STIJN POELSTRA

STIJN BRAKKEE

MARCEL VAN DER BURG

5 6
—viste d'insieme dell'intervento. L'andamento orizzontale dell'edificio evidenzia gli aspetti dimensionali: 450 metri lineari per dieci piani di altezza
—overall view of the project. The horizontal arrangement of the building brings out its proportional aspects: 450 linear meters by ten stories of height

7
—particolare del fronte nord
—detail of the northern facade

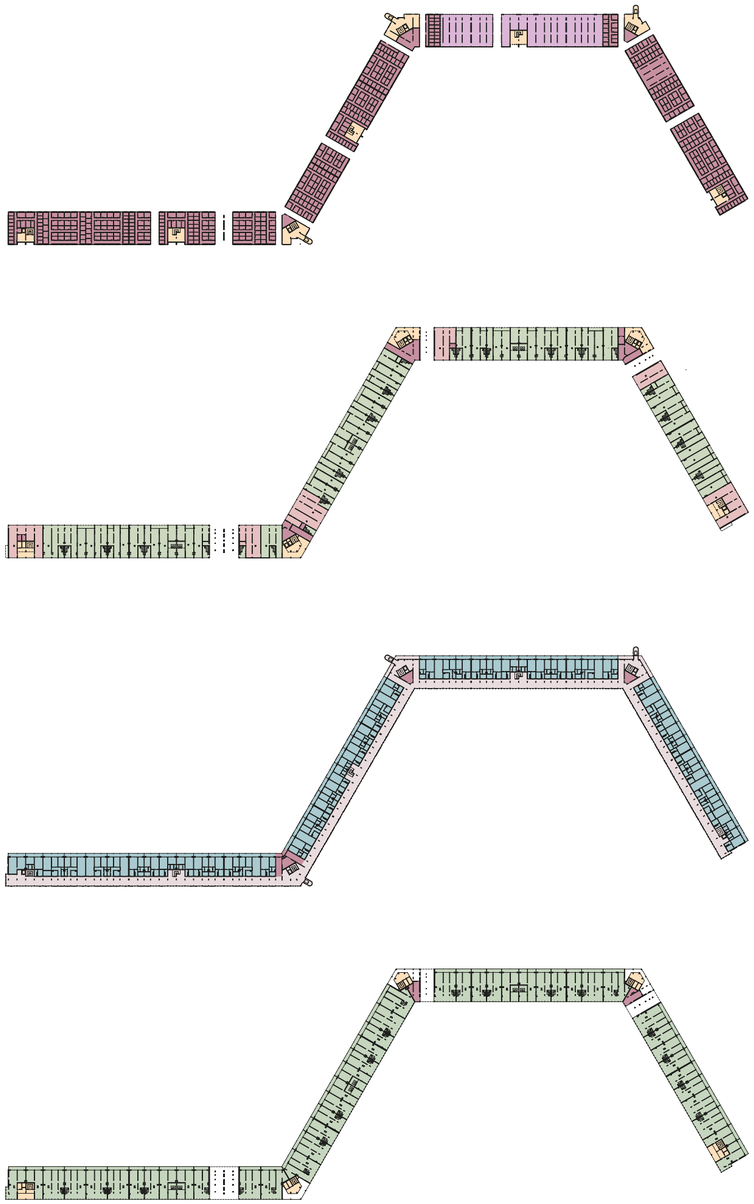
MARCEL VAN DER BURG

NL Architects e XVW architectuur
Ristrutturazione dell'edificio di Kleiburg
nel quartiere Bijlmermeer, Amsterdam

scheda del progetto
progetto
NL Architects e XVW architectuur
team di progetto
Pieter Bannnenberg, Walter van Dijk, Kamiel Klaasse e Guus Peters con Iwan Hameleers, Giulia Pastore e Fouad Addou, Matthew Davis, Paul Ducom, Soo Kyung Chun, Adrian Mans, Paulo Dos Sousa, Carmen Valtierra de Luis
progetto strutturale
Van Rossum Raadgevende Ingenieurs Amsterdam bv
progetto impianti
HOMIJ Technische installaties bv, Amsterdam
impresa di costruzione
KondorWessels Amsterdam bv
committente
Consorzio De Flat: KondorWessels Vastgoed, Hendriks CPO, Vireo Vastgoed, Hollands Licht / Martijn Blom
dati dimensionali
65.600 mq superficie complessiva
cronologia
2012: progetto
2013–16: realizzazione
localizzazione
Kleiburg, Bijlmermeer, Amsterdam, Olanda

fotografie
Stijn Brakkee,
Stijn Poelstra,
Marcel van der Burg

8

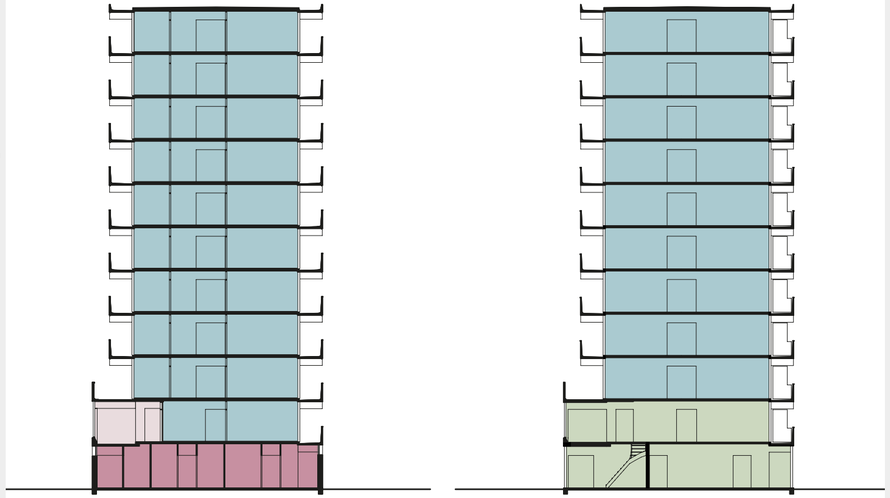


8
—confronto tra stato di fatto e stato di progetto; A-B: piano terra; C-D: primo piano
—comparison between present condition and project; A-B: ground floor; C-D: first floor

9
—sezione trasversale: confronto tra stato di fatto e stato di progetto
—cross-section: comparison between present condition and project

10
—studio tipologico delle variazioni dell'alloggio A
—typological study of the variations of residence A

9



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STIJN POELSTRA

STIJN BRAKKEE

11
—particolare del ballatoio del decimo piano. I diversi tipi di serramenti contribuiscono a costruire una riconoscibilità dei singoli alloggi
—detail of the balcony on the tenth floor. The various types of frames contribute to make the individual housing units recognizable

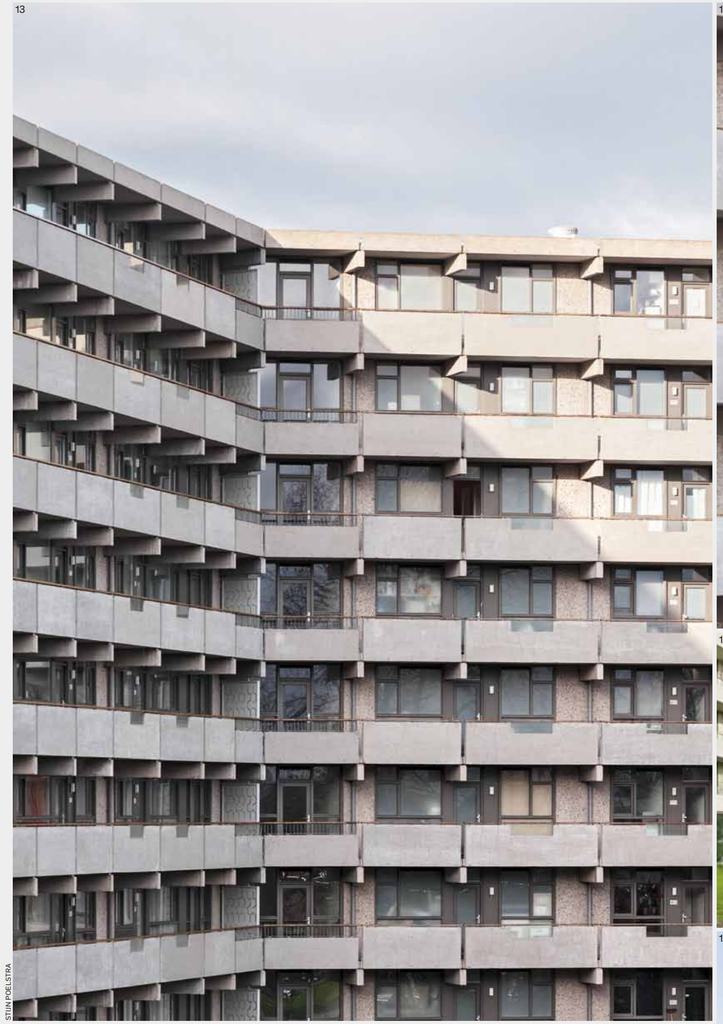
12
—particolare delle terrazze private che hanno sostituito la strada al primo piano
—detail of the private terraces that have replaced the street on the first floor

13 14
—particolari di facciata
—facade details

15
—particolare del piano terra con gli alloggi speciali che sostituiscono i precedenti magazzini. La permeabilità dei percorsi e le nuove funzioni definiscono una nuova gerarchia dell'attacco a suolo dell'edificio
—detail of the ground floor with the special lodgings that replace the previous warehouses. The permeability of the routes and the new functions determine a new hierarchy in the building's ground seam

16
—immagine di cantiere in cui le superfetazioni (a destra) vengono rimosse a favore di una più uniforme immagine
—worksite photo in which the added elements (on the right) are removed to create a more uniform image

13



STIJN POELSTRA

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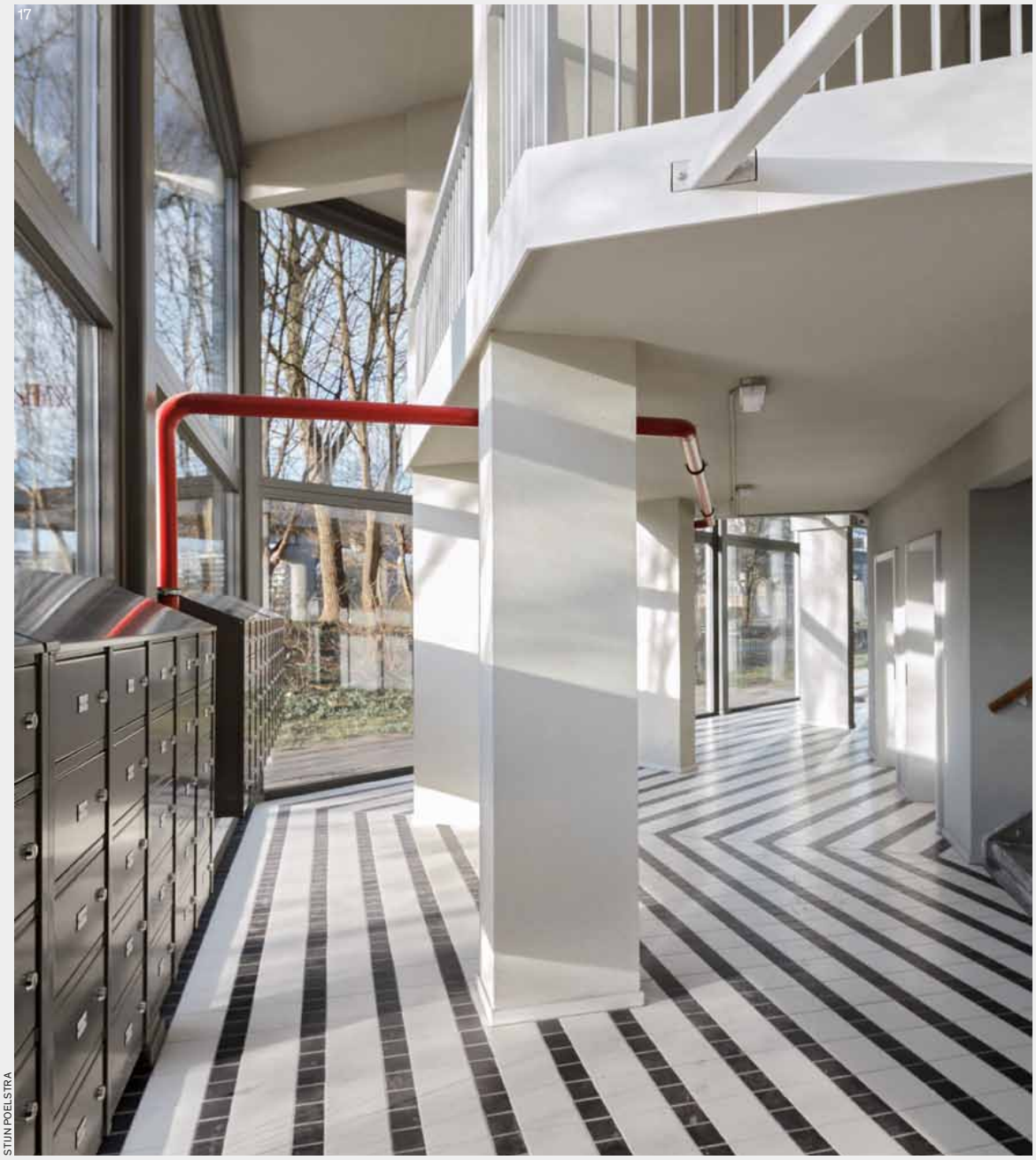
STIJN POELSTRA

15

MARCEL VAN DER BURG

16

MARCEL VAN DER BURG



STIJN POELSTRA

MARCEL VAN DER BURG

STIJN BRAKKEE

STIJN BRAKKEE

17
—vista dell'accesso comune al piano terra
—view of the common entrance on the ground floor

18
—vista interna della galleria al primo piano
—interior view of the first floor gallery

19 20
—viste degli alloggi. Il progetto lascia incompiute le opere interne in modo che i futuri inquilini possano terminare autonomamente la ristrutturazione
—views of the residences. The project leaves the interiors unfinished to allow future inhabitants to independently complete the refurbishing

ENGLISH TEXTS

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Bijlmer lives
Sergio Polano

«The Bijlmer offers boredom on a heroic scale. In its monotony, harshness, and even brutality, it is, ironically, refreshing» – Rem Koolhaas, 1976.

The Bijlmermeer district in Amsterdam – currently abbreviated as Bijlmer– is a complex of residential buildings constructed from the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, theoretically for the middle class: over 13,000 housing units, 90% in tall blocks (over 30 m) with balcony access, mostly having a semi-hexagonal plan (up to 900 m in length), with an exceptional supply of public space and a circulation layout that separates automobiles (and parking, raised at a level of about 3 m) from bicycle and pedestrian traffic, eliminating the "streets" as such. The zone has gone through a rapid process of decay, augmented by unforeseeable events, from the influx of the Surinamers to the impact of a Boeing 747. Since the early 1990s it has been subjected to a difficult program of regeneration implemented in the new millennium through large demolitions (over half the housing units) and densification of the urban fabric, with lower buildings and new neighborhood facilities, for a present population of about 50,000 inhabitants. Previously –to complete this extremely abridged historical profile– Bijlmermeer was one of the many internal bodies of water (*meer*) scattered throughout the Netherlands, reclaimed as *polders* at the start of the 1600s; it remained in a rural status inside the territory of Weesperkarspel until 1966, when this municipality was annexed to Amsterdam, without being incorporated inside its borders, created an enclave in the province of Noord-Holland.
A by-now derelict witness to the epic of mass housing –in a country that was in the avant-garde of low-cost residential development since the start of the 1900s– and an experiment that already stood out for its size, making it become a synonym for decayed urban outskirts and the *banlieue dangereuse*, the original Bijlmer was plausibly akin to the theme of the *Grand Ensemble* in Europe, which has had illustrious and rarely successful examples in France (like Le Mirail in Toulouse) and Britain (Park Hill at Sheffield, in particular); at the same time, its story has developed along a unique trajectory, not without laying claim to an ideal local continuity with the Rationalist research and aspirations of the CIAM congresses. The designer in charge of the team of the Stadsontwikkeling office in the Amsterdamse Dienst der Publieke Werken that from 1962 developed the urban planning of Bijlmer was Siegfried Nassuth, for twenty years, trained at the Delft Polytechnic with Cornelis van Eesteren, author of the famous Algemeen Uitbreidingsplan of Amsterdam in 1934; the design of the buildings was assigned to a small group of architects, including Frans van Gool, Fop Ottenhof, Kees Rijnboutt and a few others. The preliminary plan of 1963 called for lodgings for 17,000 families, mostly in buildings with a height of 6 to 8 stories, with the rest in low patio houses. Published in 1965, the definitive plan of Bijlmer was approved unanimously by the administration in 1966. A glimpse of the political-economic nature of the decisions behind it is offered, among the voices in opposition, by Jakoba Mulder, a collaborator of Aldo van Eyck and an outstanding figure in the Stadsontwikkeling until 1966, who put it in these terms: "It is a fact that tall, spectacular constructions, with the air of something new, have a particular influence on the image of the city […] However, to choose the tall typology based purely on considerations of form and prestige is, in my view, a mistake." These words came shortly after those of Constant Nieuwenhuys, the Situationist inventor of New Babylon, the anti-capitalist "worldwide city for the future," who wrote in *De Haagse Post* at the end of 1965: "This Bijlmermeer, with its lack of places of socialization, will soon trigger intense conflict, while I have absolutely no objection to it as a creative phenomenon." On 13 December 1966 the mayor Gijsbert van Hall, placing the symbolic first pylon of the foundation, declared: "To construct a Bijlmermeer in keeping with the cliché of other garden-cities would already be a remarkable achievement, but were we to do so, we would not be indicating a path for the future […] We should not aim at repeating history; we have to write it […] To date, there is no place in the world where a more beautiful and modern city of this size is being built"; on 25 November 1968 the first apartment was delivered to tenants in the tall, linear *Hoogoord* block. From 1966 to 1974 about 13,500 social housing units were completed, mostly three-room apartments of over 100 sqm, managed by fifteen real estate companies. But Bijlmer soon revealed a growing jumble of material and social problems that branded it as a precocious failure of Dutch urban planning on a large scale. "According to some, the reasons behind the lack of success of the Bijlmermeer project –wrote Rossana Atena (in "Lo strano caso del razionalismo contaminato," *Bioarchitettura*, no. 41, February/March 2005)– can substantially be traced back to a dual insufficiency of process and program. We can talk about insufficiency of process because the project was never entirely implemented: it is precisely during the construction that the design scheme is challenged and then altered. The events of Bijlmermeer […] reflect the unfolding of political and programmatic contrasts, changing plans and decisions, an absence of coordination and management, social divisions. In the original project [… the] planimetric arrangement of the buildings […] nurtures exposure to sunlight for the apartments, but the administration's need to shorten the time frame leads to simplification of the layout scheme through mere serial repetition of the same hexagonal module; the stories of the buildings are increased from six to ten; the elevators, placed in the original project at a maximum distance of thirty meters, are made at increasingly wide intervals; the idea of providing spaces of a semi-private character connected to the apartments […], organized along the corridors, is put aside, again for economic reasons; the social services are never implemented. […] The program of the project begins […] marked by excesses of functionalization and by what could be defined as hyper-programming, in practice an ideological fragility that relies on pedagogical qualities that turn out to have no basis on a social plane; above all, the rigidity of the architectural layout prevents any progressive adaptation of the structures to events and, as a result, to new necessities. The Dutch middle class, for which the apartments were designed, does not respond to the urging to move into the place […] and in any case, if it accepts the shift away from the center, prefers a lower type of residential building."
To improve the Bijlmer situation, wavering between opposing hypotheses of better management or radical modification of the plan, from 1975 to 1990 various measures of limited success were attempted, and alternative planning proposals were studied, while nearly all of the constructed resources (with 25% of the housing units empty, and a very high turnover in those with tenants) were transferred in 1984 to the Woningcorporatie Nieuw Amsterdam. The protests of the inhabitants regarding the lack of public transportation, outfitting (elevators, *rues-corridors*, cellars), shops and schools, had already begun in 1970, and the hardships only increased over time. The decolonization of Suriname in 1975 brought tens of thousands of immigrants to Holland, especially to Bijlmer (where they represent about 30% of the population, together with about 5% from the Antilles), complicating the fragile social composition of the district crowded with *Gastarbeiders* and immigrants with various ethnic backgrounds (30% circa). "The high rent was no obstacle because rent subsidy had been introduced," says René Grotendorst, president of Nieuw Amsterdam until 1996, in the book by Theo Baart, *Territorium. Bijlmermeer Zuidoost*, NAI, Rotterdam 2003. "After the Surinamers and Antilleans came groups of refugees from all over the world. This created management problems. When people moved out, the flats were left in terrible conditions, and vandalism costs millions every year." By request of the municipal administration, in 1986 Rem Koolhaas with OMA developed the counter-plan *Bijlmermeer Redevelopment, Regeneration of a CIAM Inspired Masterplan* (never implemented), which views the district as a by now historic but incomplete fragment of the city, proposing systematic infill with the *Bijlmer Strip*.
After the preparation of the report *De Bijlmer blijft, veranderen. The Bijlmer will stay, but has to change* in 1990 on the part of the municipal committee Toekomst Bijlmermeer, the decision was made to intervene on the physical structure of the area, absorbed in 1987 by the new urban district Amsterdam-Zuidoost, which now contains about 80,000 inhabitants. The fate of Bijlmer was entrusted in 1992, with an initial time frame of 15 years, to the new Projectbureau Vernieuwing Bijlmermeer, initially directed with polemical vigor by Martin Mulder, which (after long development and assessment) defined an intervention plan in 2001–02. In the programmatic absence of a master plan (to grant flexibility to the process), the PVB outlines and applies –in collaboration with various institutions (including community groups)– a wide range of options, with an impact on over 30,000 residents to date. In short: for the housing units, demolitions (completed in 2010, for a total of 7000 apartments, over half), renovations (the latest is *Kleiburg*, the only tall block still intact in 2013, earmarked for demolition but then successfully renovated by NL Architects) and replacements (about 8000 apartments programmed, 5000 completed as of 2014, 45% in tall buildings and 70% on the open market); modification or insertion of activities (in keeping with a return to the "street") of commerce, business, education, sports and social-creative pursuits; the return to ground level of 3 km of the automotive network and reduction of the garages (eleven demolished, others reutilized for other purposes); reorganization of public green areas, originally accounting for 80% of the entire area, halved (with the felling of about 17,000 trees) in favor of private gardens, sports fields and bodies of water, circulation and car parks.
"*Alphaville. Silence. Logique…*" cautioned the initial placard of the film by Jean-Luc Godard in the mid-1960s, presenting a sinister, violent but fascinating *science-fiction noir* image of the future metropolis, of which the grandiose, brutal and disturbing dream of Bijlmer (an Amsterdam alien and tragic in its "monotonous beauty") might seem like a catastrophic but sincere echo, prior to being corrected, sweetened and embalmed by the *furor regenerandi* of its administrators.

Essential bibliography

Penalized in historical terms by the lack of studies in the international literature of urban planning and architecture, the troubled tale of Bijlmer and the "dream of cement" of its semi-unknown creator Siegfried Nassuth has recently received extensive narration (at least in the language of the country) in the volume by Daan Dekker, *De betonnen droom. De biografie van de Bijlmer en zijn eigenzinnige bouwmeester (Siegfried Nassuth)*, Thomas Rap, Amsterdam 2016. A detailed investigation of Bijlmer, as a major case study in the context of large residential complexes, can be found in the doctoral thesis of Frank Wassenberg, *Large housing estates: ideas, rise, fall and recovery. The Bijlmermeer and beyond,* Ios Press, Amsterdam 2013, while the history of the Amsterdam-Zuidoost district is addressed in the book by Dick Bruijne, Willem Kwekkeboom and Anne Luijten, *Amsterdam ZO. Centrumgebied Zuidoost en stedelijke vernieuwing Bijlmermeer 1992-2010*, Thoth, Bussum 2002.

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A wander through the woods
Stephen Bates

The pair of houses in Llafranc by the Barcelona-based practice of Emiliano López and Mónica Rivera are part of a personal and ongoing research into domestic architecture and how to create a sense of home and comfort. Their recent monograph "Domestic Thresholds" reveals a number of important themes through which this condition is explored; the building up of spatial thresholds, for example, and the testing of a plan of connected rooms or almost-rooms. Alongside this, they are investigating material and its expression through construction. Recent work reveals that they are consciously testing modest, known materials to give form to their work. In the Lattice House, Palafrugell they used ceramic, in the House and Yoga Centre, Sant Cugat they used rough plaster and blinds, at Llafranc they use cork. As I have come to know their work over recent years, I observe the interesting, at times challenging tensions and the moments of wonder their work embodies. Instinct plays an important part in their work, but it is subjected to disciplined thought and rigour in the delivery of their projects. And so, while a conceptual and rigorous construction is at the heart of their work, I believe emotional and subjective aspects lie just under the surface. Such things are perceived only by experiencing their work, enjoying the company of friends, sitting in a comfortable chair, sleeping, sitting in the bath with a view, resting.
The houses are used as a family weekend getaway and holiday home and a key objective was to create low-maintenance and easy-to-clean houses, and this ultimately influenced decisions on specifications and treatments to finishes.
Early sketches reveal that the initial intention was to make a single multi-occupied house, but during discussion among family members about personal wishes and needs it became evident that preferences would more likely be met with a two-house solution. This required the purchase of a further strip of land to provide the extra footprint required to achieve the two buildings. One house in a space makes an object, but two houses placed carefully in relation to each other make a place and the result of this family agreement resonates in the architectural outcome.
The wooded hillside setting seems to have initiated everything from concept to realization, creating both restrictions and opportunities for the design to develop. Building codes determined the placing of the building back from the road and the desire to touch the ground as lightly as possible led to the final placing of the buildings upon the site. The two houses, each comprising two separate but connected cubic volumes are gently tilted in plan in relation to the road and this contributes to a picturesque composition of elements. The ambition to remove as few trees as possible led to the vertical stacking of the volumes to provide three floors, so that the houses stand as sentinels overlooking the steep, winding road below. This is given more emphasis by the stepping of the linked forms giving a broader facade and shorter return sides. Combining vertical window proportions with a delicately thin projecting roof gives a discernible Italian influence to the composition of the facades and they are expressed, from a distance at least, as two finely clipped villas that have urban rather than vernacular origins. The woodland of cork, holly oak, holly and red and white pine creates a pleasant microclimate, with cool breezes which are distinctly absent when one ventures out and down from the site toward the centre of the village and the sea. Indeed, there is a powerful sense of territory on the site and as the houses nestle within and between the rising branches and trunks, sharing their air space, they become a discernible part of the wider landscape.
The architects approached building in this woodland setting by asking themselves «What is a house in the trees? Should it stand in counterpoint or should it seek a dialogue with the physicality of the trees?». The idea of using cork as the primary material for the facades emerged at an early stage and was primarily inspired by observing the character of the woodland. Despite there being little precedent for using the material as a complete external cladding for a building, the architects developed the system from first principles understanding it both as insulant and external wrapping. The directness of the construction details in which 50mm rough cork insulation panels are screwed back to the structure and applied with a breathable, hydrophobic lime mortar coating which acts as a bonding surface for the application of the 50mm external cork panels is both surprising and highly effective. The 1000mm x 250mm external panels are laid in vertical strips with staggered horizontal joints, their width adjusted to allow for the inclusion of window openings within the vertical order. Special corner pieces ensure that the edge of the cork panel is never expressed, so that the wall is intriguingly perceived as simultaneously soft to the touch but massive in appearance. When combined with the use of cross-laminated timber panel construction which forms the main structure, the cork facade resembles bark encasing a hollow tree trunk, the cork providing an armature that conceptually and physically protects a softer interior. It prompts childhood memories of a 'camp' made within the carcass of a grand old elm tree and of the sense of enclosure experienced looking out from within the hollowed-out space.
The interiors are experienced as a series of interconnected box-like rooms and this impression is heightened by the unadorned pine structure which is left in its raw state, with knots and the occasional characterful split visible. Electrical installations are fixed directly onto the surface and the openings between rooms are left as sawn cut-outs or have solid pine door frames placed directly onto one side of the wall opening, making the door feel like an object which is propped against the wall. The dust-coloured ceramic floors, made by long-term collaborator Toni Cumella offer a subtle counterpoint and are organized in linear patterns which follow the direction of the grain of the ceiling panels, with the exception of the first floor studio. Thresholds between rooms are marked by the tiles turning direction and emphasised by the open joints, which are left to allow for movement between the structural boxes. The continuity of the wooden surfaces on wall and ceiling and from room to room is combined with a generous height-to-width proportion and it is this measured approach that dignifies the interiors giving them a subtle formality. This is most in evidence in the rear reading room of the larger house, which is almost perfectly cubic. Built-in furniture and a series of free-standing chests and cupboards make each room specific, accommodating the personal needs of its occupants, but it is when you find yourself at a desk, which is in fact an extended window cill framing a view, or sitting within a built-in cushioned window seat, somehow half in and half out of the enclosure, that you feel at one both with the structure of the house and the trees outside. These spatial episodes which engender both a feeling of privacy and of belonging whilst being simultaneously part of the life of the interior or exterior are precious. They remind us that architecture is as emotional as it is physical: it can create atmospheres and affect our mood, it can be quiet and still, generous, joyful, playful.
The houses are lived in as a set of open rooms and this is emphasized by the large folding steel glazed doors in the main communal rooms, which feel more natural when open than closed.
The placing of a concrete terrace on the front of the larger house, similar in size to an interior room, encourages natural movement between the inside and the outside. The terrace is a delightful space, enclosed by columns at each corner and accommodating a tree that rises on a lean through the ceiling of the terrace above through a circular cut-out. The dining table is positioned to allow for the tree and makes it feel somehow like an invited guest at a gathering. From this location it is possible to discern the tonal equivalence of all the elements of the facade –the cork panels, pine windows, dark stained roof soffit, concrete base plinth and terrace structure– all of which will in time come to match the quiet bark-grey colouring of the woodland itself. So, while the design is expressed by a careful composition and coordination of construction elements, time will inevitably work them together into a single monolithic whole, which will merge with its natural surroundings.
The title *A wander through the woods* was borrowed from *The Tree* by John Fowles. The book is a humble revolt against man's "use" of nature and Fowles encourages readers to re-evaluate their relationship to the natural world and their obsession with its quantifiable yield. He describes Wistman's Wood, an ancient scrap of oak forest on Dartmoor, as «self involved, rich in secrets… [of] such inturned peace, such profound harmlessness, otherness …» And yet, he finds that «all words miss». As an alternative he offers the benefits of a «don't-know mind», free from intellectualization, for which nature just is.
Similarly, looking at another fine and sophisticated work, full of conceptual rigour and constructional care, I feel it is possible, amidst the cool breeze and pine fragrance, to feel the work of these sensitive architects as simply experience and mood; an encounter while wandering through the trees, a place to dwell, a place less about reason and more about wonder and simple pleasures.

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A glass house in the forest
Fabrizio Ballabio

When in the summer of 2014, founding members of Atelier Branco, Matteo Arnone and Pep Pons were approached to design a leisurely retreat in the small town of Vinhedo, the brief posited that the house be able to accommodate at least two kind of needs: the need for a place to read, immersed within the site's vibrant vegetation; the need for a place to think, reposed under the placidness of the area's boundless subtropical skies. The client, a left block activist against Brazil's military dictatorship in his youth and now renowned scholar of the history of political thought, had conceived of the house as a temporary haven between São Paulo and Campinas, at which the State University he held teaching posts since the beginning of the nineteen eighties. It was thus neither to be a permanent place of residence nor a holiday home as conventionally understood, but a place of reverie and contemplation, occasionally of work, away from the bustle of Brazil's hectic metropolitan life.
The latest of five built works designed by the young Italo-Hispanic duo, Casa Biblioteca embodies the practice's attentive research into architectural form, matured both during their formative years in Switzerland, where they had been students of the Accademia di Architettura di Mendrisio, and in their professional upbringings under practitioners of the caliber of Christian Kerez, Kengo Kuma and the two Aires Mateus brothers. It is a bold scheme, almost entirely realised in in-situ cast concrete, of which the constructional acumen and attentiveness to detail are somewhat characteristic of all Atelier Branco's architectural pursuits. Setting up practice in Sao Paulo in 2012, the two have, in fact, built up an enticing and significantly varied portfolio of which the content ranges from the careful crafting of furniture products and fittings, to the design of commercial showrooms and office spaces, to the construction of numerous residential projects scattered throughout Brazil in which their talent has, perhaps, best expressed itself in these few years.
Belonging to this later series, Casa Biblioteca is without doubt the most idiosyncratic of the bunch, both for the eccentricity of its client and the context it was born out of. It is, in fact, set atop of a steep north-facing terrain within a clearing of Vinhedo's dense "mata atlantica" –the atlantic forest which extends over the larger part of Brazil's littoral region. Due to the site's topographical attributes, its design follows a distinctly 'sectional' rationale such that the spatial and functional disposition of the project is almost entirely articulated in the relation between two contour lines. In order of relevance, the first of these two lines consists in the line of the ground, of which the sloping profile has been manipulated to form a series of spacious horizontal terraces, fit for inhabitation; the second consists in the line of the roof, which ever so slightly hovers over the terrain's uppermost retention wall to create a sharp, horizontal datum between the domesticated topography and the sky above it.
Ever a topos of Brazilian postwar architecture from Artigas to Mendes da Rocha, here too the concrete roof takes on a crucial role in the determination of the project both in the articulation of its program as in the characterisation of its outwards (and inwards) appearance. It is a 15 cm thin rectangular slab supported by eight long-limbed pillars which, albeit "basic" in its formal resolution, distinguishes itself for the uncanny slenderness of its constitutive parts. When approaching the house from the main road, it is the upper face of this element that presents itself to the viewer offering access to a monumental viewing platform of ca. 20 by 10 meters, immersed within the foliage of the surrounding tree canopies. In place of a parapet, the deck is circled by a meter wide water bed which, in turn, defines a rectangular central island from which to contemplate the view. This latter is lined with finely cut Garapeira wood boards which meet diagonally against the deck's symmetry line and point towards the horizon.
A dentil in the in the perimeter of the roof allows for a staircase to be fitted along its central access, leading down between two concrete walls into the house's core space. This is an undivided, fully glazed, rectangular room hosting the entirety of the domestic program, of which the height gradually increases as one descends from the most intimate to the more exposed areas of the home. The retention walls which give its section the distinguished jagged profile are unique in height due to the uneven slope of the existing terrain, but spaced equally throughout to create neat tripartite structural system spanning 5.50 meters longitudinally from pillar to pillar, and terrace front to terrace front. Consequently, although equal in depth, the three terraces gain unique floor-to-ceiling heights providing the activities which take place on them with degrees of privacy and natural lighting conditions best suited to their needs. The sleeping areas are thus located onto the project's uppermost terrace within an intimate and dimly lit, 2.35 meter tall space. This level overlooks the house's central platform which measures 4.15 meters in height and hosts the client's studio; it is the area of the house most directly connected to the landscape having two centrally placed glass doors located at either of its short sides (the doors also underline the project's secondary axis of symmetry). Lastly, the terrace furthest from the house's entrance is a living and dining area overlooking the surrounding greenery as if a loggia or a viewing deck; this is the brightest and most exposed area of the house, rising 1.25 meters from ground level and measuring 5.15 meters in height.
A similarly methodical approach informs the location of the core services and storage facilities required by the client which are either carved into the project's retention walls –as is the case with the two bathrooms along first terrace wherein all elements are entirely realised in in-situ cast concrete and which, differently from all other areas of the home, are toplit and thus bare no visual connection whatsoever to the exterior– or fitted accurately against them –as with the kitchen elements, bookcases and wardrobes. As such, the space remains untethered from elements foreign to its "disegno".
The neatness of the architectural layout, is even further corroborated in the positioning of the stairs. These, rather theatrically transverse the space along its central axis to loop symmetrically around the perimeter of the house under a concrete-paved, covered pathway. But perhaps, the most significant aspect in giving the project it's somewhat rudimentary grandeur is the selection and treatment of the materials deployed. The bare structure is realised entirely out of reinforced concrete and was cast under the direction of the architects within a single working day; the floors, as with the upper terrace, are lined with long and fine Garapeira wood boards placed perpendicular to the project's longitudinal axis; and the whole is almost entirely wrapped within a single glazed facade of which the iron profiling and design motifs follow the iconic "paulistana" tradition of the nineteen fifties. It is especially the care gone into the design of these latter

elements that have made the fortune of the project of which the noble spareness could've easily been buried under the hideous chunkiness of modern-day aluminium frames. Instead, with its fine joinery and quasi-ethereal openness, the Casa Biblioteca consolidates its place amidst a rich tradition of glass houses and pavilions which since the dawn of twentieth century have almost persistently affirmed themselves as privileged sites of architectural experimentation.

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Weiss/Manfredi and the design of public spaces
Barry Bergdoll

Public Natures, Evolutionary Infrastructures: both the title and subtitle of Marion Weiss and Michael Manfredi's 2015 compendium of their New York firm's design work encapsulate a philosophy of holding seeming contradictions in simultaneous view and a commitment to engendering productive conversations across concerns too often segregated. Those skillfully engineered phrases set out to naturalize the firm's commitment to blur divisions between nature and building that craft the public realm. And they point not only to a design ethos, but also to a research agenda, one that has only gained in urgency in the destabilized world of 2018 in which even certainties of but a few years ago no longer seem to hold, from agreements on climate change, to the acceptance of globalization, to the very nature of civic discourse.

Weiss/Manfredi's design thinking has lost none of its potential as the firm has taken on sites with ever greater urban challenges and worked with clients with ever more complex, even untested requirements. Discarding any inherited binary of building and landscape such a distinction –formal, programmatic and professional– is today revealed as every bit as thread bare as so many other received oppositions the firm sets out to ignore. Their projects are at once exemplary in the sheer variety of bespoke solutions as in the extent to which each speaks a common language, displays a consistency of approach and engages a unflagging level of commitment. At least since their seminal design for the Olympic Sculpture Park of the Seattle Art Museum, a commission won in 2001 and completed 10 years ago, Weiss/Manfredi have blurred divisions between working with nature and embracing engineering to craft the public realm, and this in a moment in history that often seems an endgame for both pubic life and for nature as they have sustained society and human life for centuries. Today the public and the natural realm seem equally eroded, even under attack in the highly visible and disruptive realm of much current political discourse.

We might for a moment tease apart the very terms the architects want to join inextricably. **Public** expresses a commitment to work on projects for institutions in which the willingness –even on the part of private institutions– to create a realm for public interaction that extends beyond the most narrowly defined users of a building is the starting point for design. It also expresses a desire to forge an architecture that promotes public interaction and awareness even as these have increasingly been challenged, dislocated, and moved into the problematic and often naïve assumption that the virtual constitutes a public realm. In some two decades of practice the firm has done only one significant single family house –a rarity for most similarly sized New York firms with one foot in university architectural teaching and the other in their own design office, generally one that resists all of the tropes of American corporate practice. Even this private commission is highly specific, since it is for a site in a storied planned community of the late 19th century, Tuxedo Park, famed for its commitment to a sensitive integration of houses and natural setting all the while refusing most of what were fast becoming the conventions of American suburban development in favor of few distinctions of private property boundaries. It seems the perfect match between a client and this particular office, a rare choice for such a commission. And it brings with it many of the lessons Weiss/Manfredi have both learned and taught in work for urban parks from Brooklyn to Seattle.

With the exception of this foray into the tamed wilderness of a picturesque suburb, Weiss/Manfredi's encounters with nature have been in large cities, originally American coastal cities in the slow process of de-industrialization, and more recently also in global mega-cities from Seoul to Delhi. There they may be said to be reconquering the urban natural, or working with the reappearance of the savage natural that is such a characteristic of the post-industrial American city where the contest for resilience seems to be won by natural forces despite the heroic evidence of earlier infrastructure. Even more significantly the architects have carved an architecture of spatial richness and public generosity in realms often seen as quite unforgiving: campus buildings for institutions with tight budgets and complex bureaucratic approval processes, public museums and now most recently the United States Department of State in a challenging project for the US Embassy in New Delhi. Institutional work and the crafting of novel solutions for the promotion of public are often hard to conjugate in the present, let alone in the future tense which is the time frame of some of the hypotheses of how untested programs in experimental institutions might work, as Weiss/Manfredi often work hand in hand with institutions rethinking their own received notions.

"Natures," in the 2015 book title, was chosen in the plural, even as public remained singular and adjectival, suggesting an optimism that there still can be a larger public, despite its diverse and variable natures, rather than the fractionalized tribes whose protected existence in the new nonplace of cyber interactions threatens to become the norm. Indeed, the frequency of spaces that bring together even those who never leave the private realm without a battery of interactive screens is one of the defining programmatic and design commitments of Weiss/Manfredi's institutional work, suggesting a pragmatic desire to work with existing public natures rather than towards a romanticized notion of an ideal public. Nor do they idealize nature, yearning for a lost arcadia or imagining that nature is simply the sylvan setting for a privileged architecture. The challenge of reconciling nature with architecture in a period in which nature itself is inconceivable without the accumulated results of human interaction is the hard task their work embraces with a spirit of generous possibility. A mantra that came from the last great UN summit on climate change, the Rio +20 conference, too quickly slipping out of view is relevant here: namely that we are not destroying nature. Rather we are accomplices in changing the climate in such a way that we are rendering the natural realm inhabitable by humans, we are killing ourselves not the planet. Weiss/Manfredi are part of a growing cohort of designers, often working hand in hand with landscape design colleagues, who realize how dramatically reduced is the margin of error for designing our occupation of the planet. That is precisely the sanguine challenge that Weiss/Manfredi take on without for a moment imagining that achieving sustainability goals and creating a nature for nurturing the public can be anything but compatible goals.

Finally **"evolutionary infrastructures,"** the subtitle of the book, needs also to be parsed before the title's four terms can be inextricably interwoven again to understand the stakes of practice for Weiss/Manfredi. This phrase is, in fact, a key operative strategy, the core of the diagrams that explain the thought of generating each building from the encounter of its site and its internal creation of an extended site. This is spelled out most clearly by the designers themselves in the introduction to *Public Natures*: «Infrastructural systems are the enduring forms of urban evolution, multiplying as cities grow and requiring expanded swaths of territory to accommodate more and more mono-functional requirements. As the very momentum of exchange incrementally overwhelms our urban landscapes, we wonder what new forms of public nature might emerge if highways, communication right-of-ways, flood-resistant structures, railways, subway lines and distribution grids were to become institutions of culture and recreation.» Theirs is the realization that social, natural, and urban infrastructures are deeply intertwined and achieve potential only through architectural and landscape thinking that keeps all scales in dialogue. Each project provides a catalyst at once for local urban transformation and for a broader discussion about public and nature in a period when globalized urbanization, planetary climate change, and international connectivity with its paradoxical effects of social isolation, are all intertwined challenges. Many practices today are working on one or another of these challenges; in the work of Weiss/Manfredi they are taken on as inseparable conditions of intervention into the public realm. Perhaps the most important connection in all of the work to date is the realization that the urban and natural are no longer in opposition, but exist in a complex continuum. Nature is no longer that which is found, the man-made that which is artificial. We have so altered nature that much of landscape work has to do with restoration, renaturing, and fostering new marine and land environments even as the very climate change mankind has induced is leading nature to change before our eyes. Cities are themselves complex ecologies. With the current debates over what are called "novel ecosystems" –changed natural systems directly resulting form human intervention, be it the introductdion of invasive species or the effects of global warming– comes the recognition that nature has been altered not only by its own traditionally powerful forces, but also by one of its most willful creations, humankind. What is offered by Weiss/Manfredi are suggestive ways in which those very debates resonate in designing the novel ecosystems of today's public infrastrutcures. Tpo enter the Brooklyn Botanic Garden, for instance, via their brilliant visitor's center is to experience at firsthand, viscerally and visually, the stakes of a debate that refuses precedence of any factor. Neither nature nor building in making the city, neither the individual vs. the collective in the creation of space for education and gathering in the museums, parks, gardens, and universities for which they have designed; nor is architecture vs. landscape design conceptualized as an opposition.

In retrospect it seems poignant that the office's rapid maturation as a leading force in reflecting on the vital stakes of place making in the twenty first century should have come in 2001, the year of their selection in Seattle's Olympic Sculpture Park design competition. One can scarcely imagine a less propitious moment, as the dramatic terrorist attacks on 9/11 on key landmarks of American economic and political, as well as urban, infrastructure ushered in a period that seemed to fulfill millenarian anxieties. The new millennium opened in 2001 with every bit as much anxiety as that which famously marked the dread with which European civilizations on the Georgian calendar faced the imminent arrival of the year 1000. Even if in retrospect the Y2K digital neurosis seems risible, and has been all but forgotten, it was quickly superseded by a series of dramatic events that have revealed the fragility of so much of our physical and social infrastructure from the World Trade Center attacks to Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy in New Orleans and New York, to the revelations of systematic surveillance in the wake of Edward Snowden's revelations of the governmental use of digital surveillance and international malfeasance at previously unimaginable scales. If resiliency is the challenge of the moment, as we think to build not for ephemeral effect but rather for sustainable evolution, the most remarkable development of the early 21st century is the resiliency of the design professions in rising to the daunting challenges that make headlines. It is not surprising that the Olympic Park's vision of an urban future embedded between the lapping waves of a rising Pacific Ocean –here Elliott Bay, a major shipping corridor that explains in large measure the rise of Seattle in the late 19th century– and the continual vehicular passage of busy road and railroad corridors that had long cut Seattle's downtown off from its spectacular natural setting should have galvanized attention, awards, and exhibitions from the moment it was inaugurated. Highlighted in the Museum of Modern Art's 2005 *Groundswell* exhibition as heralding a new centrality of landscape thinking to urban architecture, the project also served as a testing ground for ideas that have never been confined to landscape as opposed to architecture. In fact, a commonality of approach can be found between projects as seemingly distinct as an open air sculpture garden and a series of institutional buildings on tight urban campuses from the Diana Center at Barnard College, to the Krishna P. Singh Center for Nanotechnology at the University of Pennsylvania to the recently opened building for the Cornell University/Technion joint venture on New York's Roosevelt Island. In each project a zig-zag visual path orders, at least in diagram, complex sectional thinking and creates unexpected and productive connections between disparate spaces and disparate social settings. In each case this dynamic circulation *parti* –one in which circulation and stasis always co-habitat– serves equally as a device to resolve complicated programmatic needs on a confined site. As in the tradition of the 18th century English Picturesque approach to landscape design, the path of the eye and that of the foot are productively dissociated. But the comparison ends there. The aim is no longer the experience of the sole stroller, achieving individual stimulation and enlightenment, but the crafting of a new engagement of individuals with the collective, and of the twin natures, manmind and natural realm, that vie with one another in cities and regions. Weiss/Manfredi are interested in negotiating the divide between individual and communal work, between solitude for contemplation and the sense of belonging to a community, an interest that was achieved in a consummate way, for instance, in the Diana Center, a building which negotiates continually between spaces of intimacy and the dramatic interplay in diagonal section of discrete spaces viewed one from another. These connections create for the teachers and for students –for whom this building is a focal point of four years living in a community– a sense of their own work and daily actions as part of a larger social group in this intimate and compact college campus divided but by an iron fence and greenery from the indifferent bustle of the city on the adjacent axis of Broadway. And perhaps most suggestively the undergraduate studios of the Columbia/Barnard joint architecture program are housed here. As in Weiss/Manfredi's work, architecture is taught to undergraduates as the crafting of a public realm in dialogue with the rest of the community. It is as though the dynamic interweaving of activities and experiences over and through the existing infrastructure of the Seattle coast line in the Olympic Park has here been internalized in a building. The building is set between a busy thoroughfare, Broadway, and the paths of a college campus, picking up the movement of one and the excitement of the other to create a zone that is at once of the city and apart from it. This interweaving of the seemingly irreconcilable to create dialogues between individual and communal that is the very basis of successful communities are challenges that have been with architecture for centuries –think of the emergence of the public library in which architects designed spaces for reading silently alone in large communal settings– but which take only fully new challenges as well as important meanings for our own time in which the very nature of society is changing radically, as much separated as connected by the digital revolution.

Weiss/Manfredi's innovative approach to merging program with an initial sectional *parti* is also a subtle site strategy. The approach has meshed with the openness of a number of institutional clients eager to innovate in seeking new types of spaces for research and teaching. Their institutional portfolio has grown dramatically since the Diana Center was inaugurated, including with a commission from the University of Pennsylvania, where Weiss is a faculty member in the School of Architecture. Entrusted with a building for one of the University's leading science departments, the architects were able to fulfill all the complex and demanding requirements for highly precise research –work with zero tolerance for vibrations and dust and thus essentially anti-urban– with an impressive creation of space outside the restrictive zones of this secure laboratory facility, and with a transparency that makes a brief that sounds like a description of a bunker into one of the most visually connected campus buildings in a generation. Here circulation is moved even more emphatically to the exterior than at the Diana Center or its sister building for architectural education at Kent State in Ohio, in both of which a service stair provided a sculptural sectional ascent worthy of Alvar Aalto at the Baker House Dormitory at MIT. In Philadelphia this circulation is now fully glazed. The designers call this zone the "galleria" –Manfredi grew up in Italy and no doubt harbors memories of the great glazed living rooms of late 19th century Italian city centers– and revel in the way it brings all the shared space of the building into dialogue with campus and with the bustling street life of Penn's West Philadelphia campus. The design analysis is typical of the morpho-programmatic research at the outset of every Weiss/Manfredi project, research in which invariably the idea of circulation sponsors ways of enhancing the interaction of users rather than simply the efficient organization of space. Here they claim to begin with a "conventional lab box" the research equivalent of the big box store. Yet this is ways a deliberate rhetorical polemic, since their thinking was from the outset an attempt to subvert, in this case through inversion, any typical solution. Starting with the normative is, for them, productively counterintuitive. The usually internalized, windowless, viewless corridor is brought to the exterior of the box and glazed, even as a site analysis located the "sweet spot" where the lab work needed to be focused at the heart of the site to buffer it as much as possible from both urban street traffic and the vertical traffic of the elevator cores. From this a veritable urban morphology was generated that creates a lab as a counterpoint of protected private spaces and shared spaces that render scientific activity visible to the surrounding city, even as they add vibrancy to the life of the public sidewalk through a dramatically cantilevered set of spaces which end the interior *promenade architecturale*, at precisely the place where users and the city have the greatest visual connections. The scientific lab has become a design laboratory, and one set not in a generic city but this very specific one. As William Penn's famous 1682 urban grid was extended to the city's western extension, the West Philadelphia neighborhood today dominated by universities, it was also given a series of diagonal streets which cut across the grid until most were erased with the consolidation of the growing campuses of Penn and Drexel University. The Singh Center occupies the center of a city block, and its design registers and echoes those nearby diagonals, that have become a veritable unifying theme of the University's campus interwoven with its city neighborhoods. Here the DNA of design solutions that connects Weiss/Manfredi's various projects also reveals traits inherited from two generations of the so-called "Philadelphia School" and its fascination with finding complex building form from the larger context, something celebrated most famously by Robert Venturi or by Romaldo Giurgola, in whose office Weiss and Manfredi met in 1987.

Similar strategies create a family grouping of university buildings all of which respond to and, at the same time, promote emerging paradigms of collaborative work settings with a pronounced quest for un-programmed encounters as essential building blocks of both the client's and the designer's creativity. While the collaborative nature of the scientific laboratory and the architectural design studio often seemed to be outliers in the normative modes of higher education, increasingly these spaces of interaction are viewed as harboring lessons for more effective teaching and research in everything from the social sciences to professional education, notably in recent schools of business and administration. The current discussion of new types of social interaction in education has extended to a new generation of work spaces which recognizes that the counterpoint to the personal computer are the shared spaces of interaction, the blurring of boundaries and lines not only of job descriptions but also of institutional partitions. The sectional connections of Weiss/Manfredi's analytics in which circulation and stasis merge –the stair paralleled by a set of open seating trays or landing platforms is a recurrent theme– meet the University's desires for spatial experimentation as an incubator for innovation.

One of the lines that Weiss/Manfredi has most productively blurred is that between the idea of the program given by the client and the form as the architect's solution to the stated problem. Rather their work emerges through an exploration of the ways in which program and form might develop together. Not surprisingly this functions best in institutions themselves in quest of new modes of interaction from the teaching architecture studio in the age of computer driven design to the fluidity between university teaching programs and business starts up that is the heart of the brief for the Cornell/Tech bridge building. In the Kent State Center for Architecture and Environmental Design the taut program of Barnard College's Diana Center, shoehorned in on a narrow urban site is allowed to relax in a verdant campus setting, even as the sectional transparency extends to encompass a much greater percentage of the cubic meters of space either physically connected or associated through transparent views. The provision of loft space, something that has grown in appreciation with a generation of conversion of older office buildings and manufacturing spaces into spaces for the 'creative industries' becomes here a starting point for delivering high quality institutional space that is as memorable for the immediate users as it is enhancing for the life of a campus. The building in short is a microcosm for Weiss/Manfredi's commitment to decloistering architecture.

Not surprisingly much of the ethos of these spaces for architecture education is infused into one of the most dramatically urban of all the firm's recent educational designs, the building for Cornell/Tech on New York City's Roosevelt Island. For decades Roosevelt Island, a long narrow island in the East River between Manhattan's most desired residential districts and the rapidly changing post-Industrial shoreline of the borough of Queens (where Weiss/Manfredi have been working for several years on the phased development of Hunter's Point South Waterfront Park), has been a laboratory for masterplanning. Once a repository for the unwanted institutions of the city –primarily hospitals– slowly since the 1970s the island has been developed as a city in the city. The island is divided into two nearly equally sized sectors by the Queensboro, or 59th Street Bridge, whose great open steel trusses take heroic steps across the narrow island on towering masonry arches. North of these the island was developed with much acclaim as a residential district in the 1970s. The southern half remained largely forgotten between a functioning city hospital and the picturesque ruins of a 19th century small pox hospital. Attention turned again to the south after a long unrealized project by Louis Kahn, a monument to FDR's Four Freedoms was constructed posthumously and opened to much acclaim in 2012. Two years earlier, then mayor Michael Bloomberg, whose administration hallmarked redevelopment of the city's river frontage, announced a competition for the development of the tract in between Kahn's memorial and the bridge, inviting proposals for a science and technology campus, a bid to make New York City competitive with Silicon Valley and other cities whose economics were based in research innovation. The winners were a partnership of Cornell University, already present in New York City with satellite campuses, and the Technion from Israel. They worked with SOM as masterplanners for the site which is to be developed in phases over the next three decades. Weiss/Manfredi's building is the third to be completed of the first phase.

One of the great challenges of the Bloomberg administration's development of the coastlines of New York City has been finding the balance between public amenities and the real estate industry's (as this activity has been relabeled in post-industrial America) eagerness to exploit river views, a challenge endemic to the development of any commercial city to be sure, and one which clearly expresses the dual agenda of New York's financial titan turned mayor and philanthropist. Weiss/Manfredi's brief equally opened a conversation about the balance not only between public and private and between inside and outside, but also between the two components of an experimental structure in which Cornell Tech shares the Bridge –as their building has been named– with rental space for start-up companies. The hope is to capture the synergies between research and innovation which in recent decades has emanated as much from a changing business scene of often small, even transitory, start-up companies and universities. The behemoth Google has enjoyed great success in occupying one of the largest industrial loft buildings in the Chelsea neighborhood of Manhattan, where many such structures have been redesigned internally by a variety of businesses which pride themselves on "out of the box" thinking. Whereas such buildings when repurposed remain impenetrable urban fortresses, despite ample fenestration –their innovative interior arrangements largely for business use and to be savored in the pages of architecture magazines– Weiss/Manfredi have broken the box open to create a new approach to designing flexible loft space for university and business alike. Noteworthy was their renegotiation of the building envelope for what remains a speculative building –ownership remains with the developer and the University and the start ups are equally tenants– in order to preserve the dramatic views that are the found nature of this site but in constant peril of disappearing from the city's natural densification. The architects have been able to take a number of inherent contradictions of the site and assignment and generate from them dramatic interactive space as rewarding for the casual visitor to this newly emerging urban campus as it will be for the planned hybrid culture of students, faculty, and entrepreneurs. The key move here was the splitting of the box into two and creating a atrium like link between the two that is one of the first diagonal view corridors that link views from river to river, from planned green space to planned green space. Rather than build to the maximum envelope literally, as most real estate driven architecture would do, they contrived to further capture inalienable views by lifting the buildings curtain wall skirts in the form of two dramatic cantilevered truss structures on opposite sides of the building. Not only are the two volumes, flexed gracefully out from four tapered concrete piers, themselves bridged by the spaces of circulation, but the dialogue with the trusses of the 59th street bridge which dominates many views of the building and from the building, reveal the sense in which in New York infrastructure and nature are both intensified in dialogue. While visiting the site with the architects, to see how the shared spaces of their signature stasis/circulation devices lay the stage for interactions between business and university tenants it was not surprising that the conversation turned to the qualities of the city's bridges. Each morning the Weiss and Manfredi head out to the office on foot from their Brooklyn home to Manhattan via the Brooklyn Bridge, whose suspended platform above the lanes of traffic is a kind of urban living room in motion savored as much by tourists to the city as by residents. Public, nature, infrastructure are brought together in their addition to the bridge landscapes of the East River. While only time will tell if Cornell/Tech's attempt to rethink the relationship between the University and the world of business and commerce is a formula for success, the development of a framework for it is clearly flexibly in place.

No less has the issue of building in the middle of the East River, whose banks saw the dramatic effects of rising sea levels as recently as superstorm Sandy in October 2012, been an concern as Weiss/Manfredi elevated the ground plane of their building, through water absorption mitigation as part of design discussions with James Corner for the park, and created mechanisms for responding rapidly to flood waters.

Perhaps the most challenging assignment to date for the firm is the one that has preoccupied the office in virtual secrecy for the last two years and is only now being revealed, namely the renovation and extension of the United States Embassy in Delhi. Here the challenge is to bring to the ever greater security concerns of an embassy campus something of the openness and the staging of future interactions, which are the hallmarks of all of Weiss/Manfredi's projects in everything from campus insertions to the design of whole landscapes, including the ongoing park work at Hunter's Park South, part of the redevelopment of the Queens waterfront across the East River from Roosevelt Island.

The campus of the US Embassy to India is a 28 acre site in the garden city developed over a century ago by the Edwin Lutyens as a new capital for Britain's then most important colonial holding. After Indian independence a large diplomatic district developed to which the United States contributed a building by Edward Durrell Stone, designed in 1954, whose fascination with perforated screen facades and open colonnaded modernist crypto-classicism produced a design not only suited to India in its imagery but in its exploration of means of natural ventilation and sun screening. Weiss/Manfredi advocated for the preservation of Stone's twin embassy and ambassadorial residence, which had quickly fallen into disfavor and which the State Department was willing to see altered or even partially demolished. They argued instead for preserving the buildings and restaging them and the site to bring new vitality to this site of interface between the United States and India. To their credit, as well as to the openness of the State Department in the round of embassy renovations and replacements launched during the Presidency of Barack Obama, the State Department agreed to a number of key moves, including the transformation of a shallow reflecting pool into a large round reservoir for use during extended draught as a centerpiece of a new interweaving of gardens and buildings. Here Indian tradition was a source of inspiration for the architect's natural proclivity to carve public spaces through both landscape and architectural moves. Key here also was the creation of a subtly zig-zagging tree lined central pedestrian axis to organize all the zones of this deep site, combining now visually even that which is divided by invisible security protocols to develop both an open vision of the United States' presence in India and a highly agreeable atmosphere for the numerous workers in the embassy. To respect the rooflines of Stone's buildings, with their prominent thin projecting roof lines, Weiss/Manfredi's new buildings are limited in height even as they open in deep cuts in the landscape to create a series of interlocked gardens of rich sectional excavation and diagonal views across spaces. One feels here the maturation of a design approach that has been formed by the continual moving between topographic and architectural work, one in which the visual boundaries between nature and infrastructure have been softened, even when the opportunities for the interaction of invited public and daily user is carefully controlled by security necessities and government policies.

An overview of Weiss/Manfredi's work is an invitation to reflect on the architectural results of their realization that social, natural and urban infrastructures are deeply intertwined. Taken together the body of work presented here is more than a collection of exemplary designs, honed by the conditions of site and commission. Rather, each project is a catalyst both for local urban transformation and for a broader discussion about "public" and "nature" in a period when globalized urbanization, climate change, and planetary connectivity –with its paradoxical effects of social isolation– are all intertwined challenges. For Weiss/Manfreid these multiple challenges are inseparable conditions of intervention in the public realm.

GRUPPO | CASABELLA

«Casabella» è disponibile anche in edizione giapponese, attraverso:
Architects Studio Japan Inc.
8-1 24F Kakuda-cho, Kita-ku, Osaka
530-0017 Japan
tel +81.06.63635701
www.asj-net.com

rivista mensile
monthly magazine

numero 882/issue 882
n. 02/2018
anno/year LXXXII
febbraio/February 2018

Arnoldo Mondadori Editore
20090 Segrate – Milano

CASABELLA
Cascina Tregarezzo – Via Mondadori 1,
20090 Segrate (Mi)
tel +39.02.75421
fax +39.02.75422706
rivista internazionale di architettura
pubblicazione mensile / monthly review
registrazione tribunale Milano n. 3108
del 26 giugno 1953

Blind-review
I testi e le proposte di pubblicazione che pervengono in redazione sono sottoposti alla valutazione del comitato scientifico-editoriale, secondo competenze specifiche e interpellando lettori esterni con il criterio del blind-review.

Distribuzione per l'Italia e l'estero
Distribuzione a cura di Press-Di srl

Pubblicità / Advertising
Mediamond S.p.A.
Palazzo Cellini – Milano Due – 20090 Segrate
tel +39.02.21025259
email *contatti@mediamond.it*
Pubblicità, Sede Centrale Divisione Living
Vice Direttore Generale: Flora Ribera
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stampato da ELCOGRAF S.p.A.
Via Mondadori, 15 – Verona
nel mese di gennaio 2018

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